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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S COURTESY CALL WITH MINISTER OF
JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS TEKKARI

REF: 06 TUNIS 2523

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4 b & d

Summary

¶1. (C) During a December 15 courtesy call on Minister of Justice and Human Rights Bechir Tekkari, Ambassador focused on Tunisia's record on political freedom and human rights, noting that these issues would be a key component of a broader strategic dialogue between the United States and Tunisia. The Minister staunchly, and stubbornly, defended Tunisia's record on freedom of expression and association, blaming most problems on a "small group of activists" that wanted to harm Tunisia. END SUMMARY.

Tekkari: "Tunisians proud of their sovereignty."

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met with Minister of Justice and Human Rights Bechir Tekkari on January 24. Tekkari, in his current position since 1999, is known as a faithful technocrat, without significant political influence in the Palace. Tekkari opened by referring to Tunisia's long history of cooperation and good relations with the United States. He said that in the judicial arena, the GOT had benefited from cooperation in several areas, including in bankruptcy and commercial law. Tekkari emphasized several times during the meeting that this cooperation was welcome, and could be strengthened further. Referring to the SOFA currently under negotiation (reftel), Tekkari expressed a desire to finalize the agreement, but acknowledged delays due in part to the fact that "Tunisians are very proud of their sovereignty."

"No Human Rights Problem," says Tekkari

¶3. (C) The Ambassador replied that further cooperation, both in the judicial sphere and beyond, could be explored through a wider strategic dialogue, including commercial, cultural, as well as political components. The Ambassador continued that cooperation on any of these fronts would be subject to progress on political and human rights, particularly freedom of expression and association. Referring to GOT rhetoric and stated plans for progress on democracy and human rights, the Ambassador expressed hope that the United States could assist in these areas. He mentioned, as an example, the possibility of increasing exchange programs that dealt with these issues.

14. (C) Tekkari, in turn, launched a staunch defense of Tunisia's human rights record. He stated, "There is no a human rights problem in Tunisia. And each year there is a new law further consolidating our progress in human rights." He said that a small group of people who "don't want to conform to the law, and who want to harm Tunisia" were responsible for "exaggerating and amplifying the problem of human rights." He defended Tunisia's record on freedom of association, claiming that groups that had not been able to obtain the receipt from the MOI necessary to register as an association had not filed applications. He said they did not file because if they were legal, they would be insignificant, but if they can claim that they are discriminated against then they increase their stature. Tekkari said similarly that the GOT promoted free expression, which could be seen in the diverse content, some of which was directed against the GOT, in Tunisian papers. Tekkari parroted a familiar GOT line that progress on human rights must be undertaken "slowly, prudently," so as not to "risk one liberty for another."

Ambassador Pushes Back on Tekkari's Human Rights Rhetoric

15. (C) The Ambassador countered that there were some unauthorized NGOs that had sought association status, but were refused. He said it was important that "the bureaucracy not prevent the creation of an NGO because people have another idea or objective. The system should be transparent and easy." The Minister, clearly becoming uncomfortable, tried to change the subject, noting that the Ambassador had not raised specific cases. When the Ambassador continued, Tekkari asked, "Why are you raising these issues?" The

Ambassador then noted the need, as a new Ambassador in Tunis, to gather as much information as possible. He also said that in some quarters in the United States, Tunisia had a bad reputation on freedom of expression and association, and needed to address this poor image. Tekkari then gave a long list of Tunisia's political and human rights accomplishments: a multi-party system, a Parliament that criticized Ministers, opposition papers, etc. The Ambassador asked why certain politically oriented websites were blocked in Tunisia. The Minister replied that sites that were blocked were either pornographic or blocked for security reasons, for example "terrorist sites." The Ambassador noted that certain sections of the Amnesty International website were blocked, and that certainly it did not constitute a security threat.

16. (C) The Ambassador emphasized that with progress on democracy and human rights, Tunisia could be a model for the region. "This is what we want," said Tekkari, "to consolidate what we have done." Th Ambassador moved on to several specific areas o past and potential cooperation, listing many aras, such as IPR and commercial law, in which Tunsia could benefit from judicial training programs ad exchanges. The Minister readily agreed, visibl relieved to talk about something besides Tunisi's human rights record. Finally, the Ambassador hanked Tekkari for assistance on several issues,including consular access and meetings hosted by OJ officials with several recently visiting U.S.delegations.

Comment

17. C) There was little surprise in Tekkari's scripted defense of the GOT's human rights record, which ncluded clearly erroneous characterizations of GO policies and actions, e.g. only blocking pornogaphic or jihadist websites, or blaming the lack f opposition-minded NGOs on an unwillingness of hese NGOs to apply for authorization. END
COMMET.

Bio Note

18. (C) As i previous meetings Tekkari was friendly, and took pride in slipping a few phrases of English into hs conversation. He said he understood slowly spken English, but could not speak it well. He wa defiant, and somewhat uncomfortable when discussng human rights issues, and on several occasionstried to steer the conversation to less sensitiv topics. Despite the tense tone of the meeting, a the meeting drew to a close, Tekkari spent seveal minutes showing Ambassador around his office, escribing historical paintings of Tunisia.

GODEC